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SUBJECT: IRAQ: ITALIAN SENATE APPROVES CONTINUED FUNDING FOR IRAQ MILITARY MISSION

REF: 04 ROME 2947

¶1. SUMMARY: The Italian Senate has approved funding for Italy's continued military mission in Iraq. We expect the Chamber to follow suit when the measure is scheduled for a vote in the lower house in the coming weeks. END SUMMARY.

¶2. On February 16, the Italian Senate approved financing for the Italian military mission in Iraq through June 30, 2005, by a vote of 141 in favor, 112 against. (Funding for missions abroad is always granted in six-month increments.) The center-right governing coalition was joined in supporting the measure by the small Union of Democrats of Europe (UDEUR), a not-overly-dedicated member of the center-left opposition. The remainder of the opposition voted against. Minister for Reforms Calderoli (Northern League) speculated that the release of a video showing Italian hostage Giuliana Sgrena in tears begging for help -- broadcast shortly before the vote -- may have been intended to influence the vote.

¶3. The Chamber of Deputies must still approve the decree before it becomes law. While no date has yet been set for Chamber debate, that vote is also expected to pass, given the Government's support for the Iraq mission and its majority in Parliament.

¶4. The center-left opposition coalition led by Romano Prodi decided on February 10 to vote against the Iraq funding decree. Until that decision was taken, some centrists in the opposition, including Daisy coalition leader Francesco Rutelli, strongly questioned whether the center-left could continue to oppose Italian involvement in Iraq in the wake of the Iraqi elections and UNSYG Kofi Annan's recently renewed call for international support for Iraq. In the end, however, the opposition called on the Government to promote a special meeting of the EU Council to develop an EU strategy to consolidate democracy in Iraq, form an inclusive representative government, and adopt a constitution "that protects the rights of all the components of Iraqi society." The left also demanded that the Security Council request a "change in mandate and an end to foreign military presence" in Iraq.

¶5. PM Berlusconi took the unusual step of addressing the Senate on February 15 to open debate on the measure. Berlusconi firmly supported the decree and Italy's continued mission in Iraq until the Iraqi government "feels itself to be secure." He called on moderate members of the opposition to "find the courage to vote in favor of our soldiers in Iraq", and asked rhetorically: "How can it be that the opposition, which invoked strong UN involvement for so long, will vote for the withdrawal of our troops now that the strategy the UN established is taking shape and having success?"

¶6. Baghdad minimize considered.
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